

Calls for a plebiscite to unwind council amalgamations meets mixed response from newly elected Inner West councillors

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Inner West Courier Inner City

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SHOULD Inner West Council be 'de-amalgamated'?



That was the question that dominated Tuesday’s council meeting as councillors went head to head on a motion to “restore local democracy” to the inner west.

The motion — tabled by Greens councillor Rochelle Porteous — called for Inner West Council staff to carry out a report on holding a plebiscite and to investigate the associated legal avenues.

The public vote would allow residents to decide whether or not they want to be part of the expanded “mega-council” or reinstate the Leichhardt, Ashfield and Marrickville councils, which were merged by the State Government in May last year.

The motion, however, sparked objections from opposing councillors over potential disruptions to council employees and costs involved with the process.

The council’s manager of administration Ian Naylor said comparable figures released by the Queensland Boundary Commission in 2013 showed the cost of de-amalgamating Noosa Council tallied \$18 million, while last month’s NSW local government elections exceeded \$1.1 million.

But independent councillor John Stamolis said financial outlay should not be used as justification to avoid a public vote.

Cr Stamolis pointed to councils which had spent ratepayer funds successfully fighting the government's merger policy in court, while the former Ashfield, Leichhardt and Marrickville councils had voted against a challenge.

"I think it's time to hedge our bets (and) and not do the wrong thing where we feared expenditure," he said.

"The courts have debunked the (merger process) and the State Government has turned its back on it — why should our community be forced to go ahead?"

The motion came as a council report revealed the cost of the merger process to date has tallied \$10.4 million including \$3.4 million on redundancy payouts, but the total sum is predicted to rise to \$45.5 million.

The State Government has provided the council with \$15 million in grants and \$10 million to cover costs associated with the process.

Deputy Mayor Julie Passas called on councillors to give the merger "a chance".

"We need to stop and think what we are doing to the staff who have just settled," she said.

"A lot of residents I speak to don't know the councils have amalgamated. People don't care as long as we continue to deliver the services they need."

An amendment to the motion tabled by Mayor Darcy Byrne included a recommendation for no plebiscite to be held unless the vote was legally binding.

The potential for a legally binding vote passed through the NSW Upper House in June but has hit a roadblock in the Liberal-held Lower House.

"We have a responsibility ... to the whole of the inner west now and we have to take that seriously, rather than quibble about how our councils may have done things better in the past."

The Greens motion passed with Cr Byrne's amendment.

The report — which will include information on reinstating local and specialist committees — is due to be presented at a council meeting in December.

<http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/newslocal/inner-west/calls-for-a-plebiscite-to-unwind-council-amalgamations-meets-mixed-response-from-newly-elected-inner-west-councillors/news-story/c10e8a619fb450edd944dofodad305c5>